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What Next From the Staff on Mideast Policy?

In her annual New Year's Day predictions, Mrs. Jeane Dixon, Washington's famed seeress, took a deep look into her crystal ball and reported that the United States was heading for a major crisis in the Middle East. So President Johnson, she prophesied, will shortly face "the most momentous decision of his life."

Mrs. Dixon might have been a little more specific, but as compared with the State Department's star-gazing she was right on target.

Now that the immediate crisis has subsided, it may be a good moment to do a little stock-taking, for our future policy in that troubled area will no doubt be influenced to an important degree by the same officials who were so slow and hesitant in anticipating and coping with the Arab-Israeli explosion.

It is always an easy game to second-guess the State Department, but considering that the taxpayers are spending about \$1 billion a year to provide it with every form of intelligence, it is hard to understand why the performance was not better. State has hundreds of

Middle East experts, it has its own Bureau of Intelligence and Research, it has a large policy planning staff, and also all the reports of the CIA.

Yet is clear that State (1) underestimated the danger of a war in the area, (2) it had no acceptable contingency plan ready for the President when war did break out, (3) it was not even certain what America's obligations were, and (4) the plan it belatedly did settle on (a consortium of maritime nations to break the Gulf of Aqaba blockade) was a failure.

Numerous foreign diplomats and foreign correspondents foresaw the trend of events long ago, as did our own charge d'affaires in Cairo, David G. Nes, who reportedly sent Washington "clear warnings in advance," but was regarded as an "alarmist" by State.

It also comes out that in the three critical months preceding the crisis there was no U.S. ambassador to the U.A.R. It appears that no U.S. officials spoke with Nasser during that time, nor since for that matter. A new but inexperi-

enced envoy, Richard Nolte, finally did arrive at Cairo on May 21 after Nasser had started mobilizing. When asked about the crisis, he is reported to have said, "What crisis?"

Now that Congress has returned from its recess, it will be interesting to see what if anything comes of talk of a congressional review of the State Department's performance as proposed by Sen. Charles H. Percy, R-Ill. In his opinion, the emergency "left grave questions about the quality of our advance planning."

Rep. Wayne Hays, D-Ohio, Chairman of a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee, already has held a closed session with Nes. Hays charges State with "contributory negligence" in failing to heed the warnings from Cairo. He says the subcommittee feels there has to be an improvement in the way messages from crisis areas are handled at the department."

It is significant that the complaints on the Hill come from spokesmen of both parties. Gerald R. Ford, the

House Republican leader, said the administration "got caught napping." Sen. Mike Mansfield, the Democratic majority leader, said the same. The Republican minority leader, Sen. Everett Dirksen, after listening to a secret briefing by the secretary of state, said, "There has to be a policy, but precisely what it is I couldn't say." The reaction of Sen. J. W. Fulbright, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was identical.

What matters now is the kind of advice Johnson gets from State on how to reconstruct the Middle East. He has a vital stake in this, and, even though he may be momentarily elated at the turn of events, he must be aware that it was the Israeli army and not State's diplomacy that took him off the spot.

The President earned some good marks for his personal diplomacy during the crisis, but it was obvious he was improvising and playing it by ear, rather than depending on a carefully planned strategy devised in advance by the professionals.

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THE PERISCOPE

Why the Soviets Blundered in the Middle East

Top-ranking Western diplomats claim that a major Soviet intelligence miscalculation contributed to the defeat of the Arab forces in the six-day war

with Israel. The miscalculation began when President Johnson asked for a breathing spell in the Middle East. The Russians expected the Israelis to give it to him; Washington, they mistakenly assumed, controlled Tel Aviv as tightly as Moscow controlled Cairo. Therefore Soviet advisers to the Arabs felt confident that the Israelis wouldn't fight. These same Western sources expect Soviet intelligence officials to receive the brunt of the Kremlin's anger.